Writing Research Impact Summaries: What Works and What Doesn't

A Training Resource for TU Dublin Researchers

Five Paired Examples Across TU Dublin's Five Faculties

Prepared by the Research Engagement & Impact Office

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IMPORTANT: All examples in this document are entirely hypothetical. They do not describe real research, real researchers, or real outcomes. All examples in this document are meant to be fictional, created solely for training purposes. Any resemblance to real persons (living or deceased), actual research projects, genuine organisations, or real events is purely coincidental and unintentional. No example should be cited, reproduced, or presented as a record of actual research or its impact. They have been created solely to illustrate the difference between effective and ineffective impact summary writing. Use them as discussion starters in workshops, training sessions, and one-to-one support meetings.

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How to Use This Document

The impact summary is often the first (and sometimes the only) section that a reviewer, funder, or policymaker reads. If it is unclear, vague, or full of jargon, the reader will not engage with the rest of your case study. A strong summary tells the reader in plain language: what the research was, what changed because of it, who benefited, and how you know.

This document presents five pairs of examples, one pair per faculty, each containing a bad summary and a good summary on the same hypothetical topic. Every bad example is followed by bullet points explaining precisely why it fails. Every good example is followed by bullet points explaining what makes it effective. The topics are fictional and do not correspond to actual TU Dublin research.

These examples can help you with understanding how to explain impact for grant writing or writing research impact case studies.

These can also be used in workshops to show the bad example first without revealing it is labelled "bad," and ask the group what they think. Then show the good version and ask what changed. This builds critical reading skills far more effectively than simply telling people what to do.

Common Problems at a Glance

Vagueness: using phrases like "significant impact" or "meaningful change" without numbers, names, or dates.

Jargon overload: writing for fellow academics rather than for the non-specialist reader who will assess your case.

Passive voice: making the research sound like it happened by itself rather than through deliberate, purposeful action.

Missing beneficiaries: describing what was done without saying who was affected and how their lives changed.

No evidence trail: claiming impact without pointing to the specific document, dataset, or testimony that proves it.

Internal focus: describing what the research team achieved rather than what changed in the world outside the university.

Complexity signalling: using technical sophistication as a proxy for quality, when the reader wants clarity.

Scale amnesia: forgetting to say how many people, organisations, or places were involved.

Faculty of Business

Hypothetical topic: *Helping Small Shops Manage Stock Better*

BAD EXAMPLE

This project delivered a scalable, data-driven retail optimisation solution through the deployment of predictive analytics, operational alignment, and capability uplift across a representative SME cohort. Outcomes included enhanced resilience, improved inventory governance, and reduced friction in procurement workflows. The initiative demonstrates strong potential for sector-wide adoption and meaningful downstream economic value.

Why it fails:

Vagueness: Phrases like "retail optimisation solution" or "enhanced resilience" mean nothing without numbers. What was optimised? How much resilience? Compared to what?

Complexity: "Meaningful downstream economic value" is a convoluted way of saying "we stopped wasting money on stock orders." If a shopkeeper would not say it, neither should you.

Passive tone: It sounds like the project happened by magic rather than through specific, deliberate actions by identifiable people.

No beneficiaries: We learn about "a representative SME cohort" but nothing about the actual shops, what they sell, or how their daily work changed.

Claims without evidence: "Strong potential for sector-wide adoption" is an assertion with nothing to back it up. Who says so? Where is the evidence?

GOOD EXAMPLE

We tested a new way for small shops to order stock using simple demand forecasts rather than habit or gut feel. We ran the approach in 12 shops and compared results with their own records from the previous six months. The main changes were fewer empty shelves for fast-moving items and less time spent doing orders. Results varied by shop, but most saw at least a 20% cost and time saving. The approach worked best for shops with stable weekly sales patterns and struggled when suppliers were unreliable. We produced a short guide and spreadsheet template that participating shops can keep using without extra software costs.

Why it works:

Direct language: "We tested" and "We produced" make it clear who did what. The reader knows immediately that real people carried out specific actions.

Concrete numbers: Twelve shops, six months, 20% saving. The reader can form a mental picture of the scale and significance.

Honesty about limitations: Acknowledging that the approach "struggled when suppliers were unreliable" builds credibility. Reviewers trust writers who do not over-claim.

Human element: "Fewer empty shelves" and "less time spent doing orders" describe changes that a shopkeeper would recognise and care about.

Sustainability: The guide and spreadsheet template show that the benefit outlasts the project. The impact does not vanish when the researchers leave.

Faculty of Computing, Digital & Data

Hypothetical topic: *Moving a Company's Systems to the Cloud*

BAD EXAMPLE

The architectural transition from legacy on-premise hardware to a distributed cloud-native infrastructure facilitated the implementation of high-availability clusters. By leveraging container orchestration and elastic scaling, the DevOps team achieved a significant reduction in latency during peak load periods. This migration ensured robust disaster recovery protocols and the mitigation of single points of failure, enhancing the overall resilience of our digital ecosystem.

Why it fails:

Irrelevant detail: The reader (a funder, policymaker, or non-technical reviewer) does not care about "container orchestration." They care whether the website stays up and whether money was saved.

Vague benefits: "Enhanced resilience" and "significant reduction" are subjective. How much faster is it? How much more reliable? Without numbers, these claims are meaningless.

Internal focus: The summary highlights what the DevOps team did, not how the user or business benefited. Impact is about change in the world outside the project team.

Jargon barrier: Terms like "high-availability clusters," "elastic scaling," and "digital ecosystem" exclude anyone who is not a cloud engineer. Impact summaries must be accessible to all readers.

No human consequences: Not a single person, customer, or organisation is mentioned as being affected. The summary reads like a technical report, not an impact narrative.

GOOD EXAMPLE

We moved our website and internal databases from old physical servers to a modern cloud system. This change ended our frequent Friday afternoon crashes, meaning customers can now complete purchases 24/7 without interruption. Page loading speeds improved by 40%, which helped increase our sales conversion rate by 5%. Additionally, we no longer pay EUR 3,000 a month to maintain ageing hardware that was prone to breaking.

Why it works:

Problem/solution structure: It identifies a specific, relatable pain point (Friday afternoon crashes) and shows exactly how it was resolved.

Business metrics: The summary links the technical work to outcomes anyone can understand: "sales conversion rate" and "monthly maintenance costs." Impact is expressed in language the reader values.

Clarity: Anyone from HR to Finance to an external reviewer can understand exactly what happened and why it mattered. No specialist knowledge is required.

Specificity: "40% faster," "5% increase," "EUR 3,000 a month." Each claim is concrete and verifiable. The reader trusts the writer because precision replaces vagueness.

Customer perspective: "Customers can now complete purchases 24/7" puts the beneficiary at the centre. The summary answers the question "so what?" immediately.

Faculty of Arts & Humanities

Hypothetical topic: *Using Theatre Workshops to Support Refugees' Integration*

BAD EXAMPLE

This interdisciplinary initiative leveraged performative methodologies within a participatory framework to facilitate the co-construction of cultural narratives among forcibly displaced persons. The intervention catalysed a paradigm of embodied agency, enabling participants to negotiate identity within liminal spaces. Stakeholder feedback indicated positive sentiment towards the programme's capacity to foster intercultural dialogue and enhance psychosocial outcomes. The project offers a transferable model for arts-based integration praxis in analogous displacement contexts.

Why it fails:

Academic performance: "Co-construction of cultural narratives among forcibly displaced persons" is a sentence designed to impress other academics, not to communicate impact. The reader who decides funding does not speak this language.

Dehumanising abstraction: Real people who have fled war or persecution become "forcibly displaced persons" negotiating "identity within liminal spaces." The humanity is stripped out entirely.

No specifics: How many people participated? Where? For how long? What actually happened in the workshops? The reader finishes this paragraph knowing nothing concrete.

Vague evidence: "Stakeholder feedback indicated positive sentiment" could mean anything from a formal evaluation to someone nodding in a corridor. What was measured? By whom?

Unsubstantiated transferability claim: Calling it "a transferable model" without evidence of anyone else adopting it is an aspiration, not an impact.

GOOD EXAMPLE

We ran weekly theatre workshops for 45 refugees and asylum seekers in two Direct Provision centres in the midlands over eight months. Participants created and performed short plays based on their own experiences of arriving in Ireland. After the programme, 82% of participants reported feeling more confident speaking English in everyday situations, and 68% said they had made friendships outside the centre that they attributed to the workshops. The performances were attended by 320 local residents, and a post-event survey found that 74% of attendees said the experience changed how they thought about refugees in their community. The Irish Refugee Council adopted the workshop model for three additional centres, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth cited the project in its 2025 integration strategy as an example of effective community-level practice.

Why it works:

Real people, real places: "45 refugees and asylum seekers in two Direct Provision centres in the midlands" tells the reader exactly who, where, and how many. The impact is grounded in reality.

Participant voice: Reporting what participants said they experienced (confidence, friendships) respects their agency and makes the impact tangible and human.

Dual impact: The summary captures change both for participants (confidence, social connections) and for the wider community (changed attitudes among 320 attendees). Good impact summaries often show ripple effects.

Adoption as evidence: The Irish Refugee Council adopting the model and a government department citing the work are concrete, verifiable forms of evidence that the research made a difference beyond the original project.

Honest scope: The summary does not claim to have solved refugee integration nationally. It describes a specific, bounded intervention and its documented effects. Modesty builds trust.

Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment & Apprenticeships

Hypothetical topic: *Reducing Energy Waste in Older Apartment Buildings*

BAD EXAMPLE

This research programme addressed the thermal performance deficit in Ireland's multi-unit residential building stock through the development and validation of a novel retrofit intervention protocol incorporating advanced insulation technologies, dynamic thermal modelling, and occupant behaviour analytics. The holistic, systems-level approach optimised the interplay between building fabric, HVAC systems, and end-user engagement, yielding statistically significant improvements in energy performance indices. The outputs represent a substantive contribution to Ireland's decarbonisation trajectory and align with national and European climate targets.

Why it fails:

Abstraction overload: "Thermal performance deficit in multi-unit residential building stock" is an alienating way of saying "older apartment blocks that waste heat." The reader has to translate every sentence.

Process obsession: The summary describes the research methods (dynamic thermal modelling, occupant behaviour analytics) rather than the results. Impact reviewers want to know what changed, not how the modelling worked.

No scale or specifics: How many buildings? How much energy was saved? How much did it cost? How many people live there? The summary is entirely devoid of numbers.

Performative alignment: "Aligns with national and European climate targets" is a statement anyone could make about almost any energy research. It adds nothing unless you say which target, by how much, and according to whom.

Missing beneficiaries: Not a single tenant, household, or community is mentioned. The research apparently improved "energy performance indices," but the humans living in the cold flats are invisible.

GOOD EXAMPLE

We tested three different approaches to insulating 1970s apartment blocks in Ballymun without requiring tenants to move out. Working with Dublin City Council and 196 households across four buildings, we monitored energy bills, indoor temperatures, and residents' comfort for 18 months before and after the work. The best-performing approach (external wall insulation combined with heat pump installation) cut heating bills by an average of 54% and raised winter living room temperatures by 3.8 degrees Celsius. Fourteen residents who had previously reported damp-related respiratory problems told us their symptoms improved after the retrofit. Dublin City Council used the results to prioritise EUR 12M of retrofit funding across its housing stock, and the Department of Housing cited our cost-comparison data in its 2025 guidance on retrofit approaches for local authority housing. The work was reported by RTE News and in Construct Ireland magazine.

Why it works:

Specific and grounded: "1970s apartment blocks in Ballymun," "196 households," "four buildings," "18 months." Every claim is anchored in a concrete, verifiable detail.

Residents at the centre: The summary describes what changed for the people living there: lower bills, warmer rooms, fewer respiratory symptoms. The human benefit comes before the policy uptake.

Comparative information: Testing three approaches and identifying the best one is far more useful than claiming a single method works. It shows rigour and gives decision-makers actionable information.

Evidence chain: Heating bill data, temperature records, resident health reports, council funding decisions, government guidance citation, and media coverage. The summary traces a clear path from evidence to influence.

Policy influence named: The Department of Housing and Dublin City Council are identified by name, with specific actions (prioritising funding, citing cost data in guidance). This is verifiable impact, not a vague claim.

Faculty of Sciences & Health

Hypothetical topic: *Detecting a Contaminant in Drinking Water More Quickly*

BAD EXAMPLE

This study describes the development and analytical validation of a novel biosensor platform utilising functionalised gold nanoparticle arrays for the rapid electrochemical detection of emerging contaminants in potable water matrices. The sensor demonstrated superior limit-of-detection characteristics relative to incumbent methodologies, achieving sub-parts-per-billion sensitivity across a range of environmentally relevant analyte concentrations. The platform represents a significant advancement in environmental monitoring capabilities and has the potential to inform regulatory decision-making in the water treatment sector.

Why it fails:

Written for a journal, not for an impact audience: "Functionalised gold nanoparticle arrays" and "potable water matrices" belong in the methods section of a chemistry paper. An impact summary needs to say what the thing does and why it matters in plain language.

Focuses on the sensor, not the people: Nobody drinks "potable water matrices." People drink tap water, and they want to know it is safe. The summary never mentions a single person, household, or community that benefits.

Relative claims without context: "Superior limit-of-detection characteristics relative to incumbent methodologies" tells the reader you are better than the old method but not by how much, at what cost, or why it matters practically.

"Has the potential to inform" is not impact: Potential is a promise, not evidence. Who has actually used the sensor? Where? Did it change any decision? Without adoption evidence, this is a research output, not an impact.

No named organisations: The "water treatment sector" is a faceless abstraction. Naming Irish Water, the EPA, or a specific utility would make the claim concrete and verifiable.

GOOD EXAMPLE

We built a portable testing device that detects traces of PFAS chemicals (sometimes called "forever chemicals") in drinking water in under 15 minutes, compared to the two days currently needed by laboratory analysis. We tested the device at 38 water treatment plants with Irish Water over 12 months. It correctly identified PFAS contamination in 97% of cases when checked against standard lab results. The speed of testing meant that three contamination incidents were flagged and addressed within hours rather than days, preventing affected water from reaching approximately 14,000 households. Irish Water adopted the device into its routine monitoring programme at 12 high-risk sites. The EPA referenced our validation data in its 2025 guidance on PFAS monitoring in Irish drinking water supplies. The story was covered by the Irish Times and by RTE's Morning Ireland.

Why it works:

Accessible explanation: "Traces of PFAS chemicals (sometimes called forever chemicals)" translates the science without dumbing it down. The reader understands the problem immediately.

Speed comparison: "Under 15 minutes compared to two days" is the kind of before-and-after comparison that makes impact tangible. The reader grasps the significance in a single sentence.

Consequence for real people: "Preventing affected water from reaching approximately 14,000 households" puts the human stakes front and centre. This is what the funder and the public care about.

Named adopters: Irish Water and the EPA are identified by name with specific actions (routine monitoring, guidance citing the data). The reader can verify these claims independently.

Media coverage included: Mentioning the Irish Times and RTE's Morning Ireland shows that the impact reached a public audience and was considered newsworthy. It also provides an additional verifiable evidence source.

Quick Checklist for Writing Your Impact Summary

Before you submit your impact summary, read it aloud and ask yourself these questions. If you cannot answer "yes" to most of them, revise until you can.

Can a non-specialist understand every sentence?

If your neighbour, your parent, or a journalist would need a glossary, simplify the language. Technical accuracy matters, but clarity matters more in an impact summary.

Have I named specific people, places, or organisations?

"45 refugees in two centres in the midlands" is impact. "A cohort of participants across multiple sites" is a fog. Name the places, count the people, identify the organisations.

Do I have at least one concrete number?

Percentages, quantities, money saved, time reduced, people reached. Numbers make impact believable. If you have no numbers, ask yourself whether you have actually evidenced your impact.

Have I said who benefited and how their experience changed?

Impact is about change in the world outside the university. The summary must describe what is different for a patient, a business, a community, a policymaker, or an environment as a result of the research.

Have I named who adopted, endorsed, or cited the work?

A named organisation taking a specific action (adopting a tool, citing research in guidance, changing a policy) is the strongest form of impact evidence. Vague references to "the sector" or "stakeholders" do not count.

Have I acknowledged limitations or variability?

Honest summaries build trust. Saying "the approach worked best when..." or "results varied by..." shows intellectual integrity and makes the positive claims more credible.

Would I be comfortable if this summary appeared in a newspaper?

This is the ultimate test. If the language is too technical, too vague, or too self-congratulatory for a news article, it is too much for an impact summary.

Have I included at least two different types of evidence?

Strong summaries draw on multiple evidence types: quantitative data, testimonials, policy citations, media coverage, adoption records, independent evaluations. Relying on a single source weakens the case.

For support in writing your impact summary, or to book a one-to-one session with the Research Impact Lead, contact the Research Engagement & Impact Office at engagementandimpact@tudublin.ie